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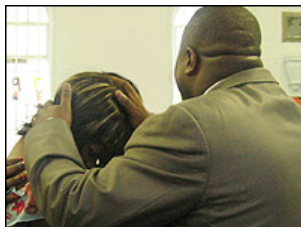
'Exorcisms are part of our culture'

By Cindi John

BBC News community affairs reporter

The conviction of three Angolans on child cruelty charges raised concerns about exorcism practices among some African communities.

Those concerns have been echoed in a police report leaked to the BBC which suggests children may have been trafficked into the UK for sacrifice. But what role does exorcism play in some African churches?



'Deliverances' are a common ritual at some African churches

There is complete silence in the packed church hall as the pastor and church elders place their hands gently on members of the congregation standing in a row at the front.

All these people believe they have been infected by an evil spirit and have come for an exorcism or 'deliverance' ceremony.

Some cry as the pastor and elders whisper prayers into their ears in a bid to force out the spirit they believe has possessed them.

It is a ritual which is repeated every Sunday at the meeting of the Pentecostal Church of the French Christian Community Bethel (CCFB) near Harlesden in north-west London.

The congregation is made up mainly from the large community of Congolese and Angolans living in the area.

But the ceremony the CCFB's members undergo is a world away from that experienced by the Angolan girl at the centre of the Old Bailey case who was accused of being 'ndoki' - a 'witch' in the Lingala language used by Angolans and Congolese.

She had peppers rubbed into her eyes and was threatened with drowning in what her carers said was an attempt to drive out the evil spirit which had possessed her.

Her case had echoes of Victoria Climbié, an eight-year-old from Ivory Coast who died after abuse by her aunt who claimed the child was possessed.

'Infected food'

Belief in witchcraft has spread rapidly in some parts of central and southern Africa over the last few years, says Dr Richard Hoskins, senior research fellow in sociology and religion at King's College, London.

'Ndoki' was said to target children particularly either when still in the womb or in early childhood through a piece of food infected with the evil spirit, said Dr Hoskins who has made an extensive study of traditional religions in Africa.

"I'm finding this particular issue of possession is something associated with the Democratic Republic of Congo, the People's

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Republic of Congo and Angola.

The CCFB's pastor, Modeste Muyulu, confirms he and the 120 members of his congregation believe absolutely in the existence of evil spirits and witchcraft.

"We know that ndoki does exist. Back home and everywhere else too there are people who are used by the devil to bring a curse or bad luck to other people's lives, even to kill them," says Pastor Modeste.

The pastor says he has helped in only one case of what he believed to be genuine ndoki in the 20 years since he came to the UK but violence was not needed for deliverance even when witchcraft was involved.

"Sometimes we hear that some servants of God have been very violent when they're doing deliverance.

"But disciples should only do what the master did, I never read in the bible about Jesus Christ being violent with anybody to cast out any spirit," he says.

'Money-making schemes'

Dr Hoskins agrees instances of extreme violence are rare. "My experience of Africa and the Congo where I've lived for years and travelled a lot is that Congolese people love their kids," he said.

"True they fear sorcery or witchcraft but they don't tend physically to harm a child who may be thought to be a conduit."

Antoine Lokongo, the editor of a Congolese newsletter, Congo Panorama, believes the growing violence in exorcisms is due to western influence.

“ There has to be a task force set up to look at this issue on an inter-governmental level ”

Dr Richard Hoskins

Exorcisms in themselves were not a bad thing and part of Congolese culture and identity, he said.

"This is part of our identity, part of our culture but it's being exploited for economic reasons."

He said some of the churches and charities set up by Congolese people in the UK were simply "money-making schemes".

Child exorcisms were becoming widespread with the growing population seeking refuge in the UK from war zones in Angola and Congo, he added.

Dr Hoskins agrees the issue is one which concerns both the African community in the UK and in their homelands.

"I think they're inter-linked and both have to be treated. There has to be a task force set up to look at this issue on an inter-governmental level," he added.

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